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ABSTRACT

Emphasizing the writing product rather than process, this paper presents two writing samples each for three students and evaluates them using five questions: (1) What are the strengths of the paper? (2) What are the weaknesses? (3) What are the apparent differences between the two writing samples? (4) What other information do you need about this student? and (5) What could the classroom teacher do to help the student? According to the paper, these questions focus attention both on specific skill needs and on the students' general writing practices. (MM)

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THE PRODUCT HAS MEANING

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The Product Has Meaning

The writing process has received much attention in the past few years. Discussion has focused on teacher intervention at various stages of that process which will inturn help the student improve. Yet I do not believe that we can ignore the product -- the end result -- of that process; and indeed, that product can yield some interesting speculations about the student as writer. These speculations can inturn lead to the beginnings of a plan to help the student improve.

To judge a student's writing ability, the teacher needs to examine various samples of the student's written work. To make instructional decisions based on these samples, the teacher is better able to assist the student if there are a number of samples written for different purposes and audiences and in different forms or modes.

A holistic evaluation of the written sample yields certain information, the relation of the paper to specific standards and the relationship of the written product to others written by different students at the same time. The holistic evaluation can indicate in a broad sense whether the student is a capable writer or one who will need instructional help.

This type of evaluation, however, is just the start of the development of an instructional plan to help the student improve as a writer. If such instruction is to take place, the teacher must go back to the student's written work and examine it in detail.

Several precautions are necessary in this practice, however. The product cannot be totally divorced from the writer and should not be in most cases. In the classroom situation, the teacher needs to know the history of the student as a writer, how much the student has written, the kinds of writing done, the student's attitude toward writing, and what the student knows about the writing process. The classroom teacher should observe the student as writer and would also be aided if samples of the student's writing from previous years were available.

If the student's paper is analyzed, skill-weaknesses identified, and then if instruction focuses exclusively on the skills in isolation, the student's written work may not improve. We will also lose sight of the whole piece of discourse, and there will be a hope for skill transfer which may never occur.

Student papers used in the material which follows were written when field-testing was done for the Writing Test for New York State Elementary Schools: Grade 5. I have used five questions to examine each paper. Any number of other checklists are available for such analyzation, and teachers can develop their own depending upon what they want to examine in the student writing.

A Case Study

1. What are the strengths of the paper?

2. What are the weaknesses?

3. What are the apparent differences between the two samples of writing?

4. What other information do you need about this student?

5. What could the classroom teacher do to help the student?

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STUDENT A ____

Please, Something Go Right!

Monday the 27th of November was such an all day I thought I was dreaming! First I overslept but to make matters worse I couldn't find my uniform or shoes! As it turned out, I had missed my bus. My Mother drove me to school, but when I walked into my class they were working on a test that I forgot to study for! Oh great, I thought to myself now I have 29 eyes watching me get settled. I forgot my math homework, or at least I thought it was math, it could have been religion. After lunch I began to get an earache, I didn't pay much attention to it because I was going to the doctor after school. On my way to the doctor I sat on my mirror (7 years bad luck) and threw up on my mothers purse. The doctor said my ear is infected, so know I have to take this gross pink medicine. When we got home my favorite record skipped and we are having technical difficulties

[OVER]

with our T.V. Before I went to bed I used my father's toothbrush! What else could go wrong? It was worse than Friday the thirteenth!

STUDENT A

Doll-House Girl

What do you think I do in a doll-house? Not much. How many T.V.'s and books come in doll-house size? Most of my time is spent finding my way out of bed covers. Some fun!

You might ask "How did I get to be five inches tall?" Well, I didn't think I was allergic to anything until now. I was using my friends products when I began shrinking. From then on my life got tougher, some good things but mostly bad.

Some of the bad things were, being friends with the mice that invaded our doll-house, being washed and carried around by my dog. But worst of all being stepped on by our mailman! Can you imagine me eating turkey on Thanksgiving? Or sitting in a matchbox for a school desk? How about getting thrown out with boxes or wrappings as Christmas? Being five inches tall is not my idea of fun!

Task 1: After you get up some days, nothing seems to go right.

Write a composition of about 150 words telling about a day when nothing seems to go right.

A Case Study

Paper 1 - Student A

1. What are the strengths of the paper:

   Student handles the task well.
   Response is organized, with specific examples.
   Student tries to bring action and humor to the piece.

2. What are the weaknesses of the paper?

   Some editing needs to be done to correct punctuation, spelling, and paragraphing. This student might have done this in an instructional situation.

3. What are the apparent differences between the two samples of writing?

   Question will be answered on the next page.

4. What other information do you need about this student?

   What attitude does the student have toward writing?
   How much writing has been done?
   Are there ways that the student's writing experience could be enriched?
   What types of material does the student read?

5. What could the classroom teacher do to help the student?

   Give the student many and varied writing experiences.
   Expand opportunities for the student to read various types of writing.
   Provide opportunities for the student to help peers.

Task 2: Pretend that you are only five inches tall.

Write a composition of about 150 words telling what your life as a five-inch person is like.

1. What are the strengths of the paper?

   Student handles the task well.
   Paper is organized and again the student brings unity and humor to the piece.
   In both compositions, this student brings unity to the writing by adding sentences which tie it all together.

2. What are the weaknesses?

Redundancy in the first few sentences detracts from the whole.
Although an attempt is made to organize the piece, the student can use some help in this area.
The student rambles and loses some focus in the piece.
Conventions of language need attention.

3. What are the apparent differences between the samples of writing?

No striking differences between the two pieces except length.
The student appeared to have more ideas about Task 2 than Task 1.

4. What other information do you need about the student?

Same as previous answer.

5. What could the classroom teacher do to help the student?

Same as previous answer.

Summary

The student does have some facility with language and probably needs much more writing experience. Additional material shows that the student did not seem to know how to use the prewriting segment. In draft copy for Task 1, the student wrote something entirely different which suggests that the finished product for Task 1 is in reality a draft copy as well. This student can improve as a writer with experience and instruction.

STUDENT B

May 18th, 1979 was my worst day. First of all the addition wasn't up yet so in my room, the living room, and the kitchen started to leak, so Mr. & Mrs. Joyce came with some buckets for us. They stayed for awhile then the cellar started to leak. Since there was no place for me to sleep. Mrs. Joyce asked Heisten to sleep over. She said "No." So she asked me. I said "No". But my mom made me. I did not want to go 'cause they had all boys. I said I'd sleep with Brian (the youngest). Because it was a school night. I rode there bus. That was the worst night.

STUDENT B

It would be afful being 5 inches tall. I would be stepped on a lot. If I tried go am uwhere (am ash) it would only be miserable But then then then the best part I would-nt be able to go to school, because if I did I could be stepped on. But I would be getting small, very small books. And if I get stepped a lot I would have to go to the Hospital a lot. I would get speical clothes by my Mom & Nana, from wool to cloth. My mom would bring up all my sisters doll houses, doll playground, farm, preschool an school. Little beds to sleep in, eat on, and sleep on. And a match box for a car. I would get lots of attion. But I would be lonley! There wouldn't be anyone my size to fool around with. And for Christmas all I would get is things to sleep on, eat on, chairs, cars, and a letter and a little T.V. Plus a sounds like home doll house So as I say 5 inches is ROTTON!!

Case Study

Paper 2 - Student B

Task 1: After you get up some days, nothing seems to go right.

Write a composition of about 150 words telling about a day when nothing went right.

1. What are the strengths of the paper?

Student responds to the task.
The student organizes the piece and attempts to bring unity to it.
The student attempts to use dialogue, as limited as it is.

2. What are the weaknesses?

Not much detail is given to support the general idea of worst day.
Although the use of dialogue is a plus for the writer, the reader feels that this may be an attempt to expand the composition.
Language used is on an elementary level as is most of the sentence structure.
Errors in conventions of language--spelling, punctuation, usage.

3. What are the apparent differences between the two samples of writing?

To be answered later in the discussion.

4. What other information do you need about this student?

How much writing has the student done?
Does the student do much reading or does the student have difficulties in this area as well?
What are the student's strengths and weaknesses with oral language?

5. What could the classroom teacher do to help the student?

Give the student opportunities to do some free writing.
Provide instruction in sentence expanding and sentence combining.
Have student develop techniques to list details to support generalizations.
Work with the student to improve editing skills. Peer conferencing could help in this area.

Task 2: Pretend that you are only five inches tall.

Write a composition of about 150 words telling what you life as a five-inch person is like.

1. What are the strengths of the paper?

The student handles the topic.
An attempt has been made to organize the piece and to bring unity to it by trying the last sentence to the task.

2. What are the weaknesses?

The student mentions "good and bad" things but concentrates entirely on the bad.
Some punctuation, spelling, sentence structure problems which could probably be rectified easily through instruction.

3. What are the apparent differences between the two samples of writing?

The reader senses that the student felt more comfortable with Task I than Task II.
Skill level appears to be about the same in both papers.
No real apparent differences emerge.

4. What other information do you need about this student?

Same as previous answer.

5. What could the classroom teacher do to help the student?

Same as previous answer.

Summary

If you had all of this student's material--prewriting, draft copy--, you would know that this student is a sophisticated writer. The student included information from the prewriting segment on both tasks. In addition, specific changes were made in the second copy.

With instruction and experience, this student could prove to be a very good writer.

STUDENT C

"

One day I hit my toe on the bed and my toe became sore. The day before yesterday I fell down the step. One day I ran in to the wall, and got a big lump on my head and it became wost. I fell in a mud pill before. One day I cut my finger and it scarred. Yesterday afternoon my [illegible] broke, and no one had a [illegible] that I needed. On Tuesday evening the light blowed out and it was dark and no one saw nothing

STUDENT C

If I was five-inches I'll
Live in a coal cellar. I'll
Scare away the mice and
Rats.
But something might happen
to me; like someone might
step on me; a dog might eat
me.
I might fall on a mouse
trap and get killed.
I might fall down a stor
drain, and a rat might eat
me.
Maybe I will fall out the
window.
Maybe I get hit around

The
End.

Case Study

Paper 3 - Student C

Task 1: After you get up some days, nothing seems to go right.

Write a composition of about 150 words telling about a day when nothing seemed to go right.

1. What are the strengths of the paper?

The student knows that the task requires information about a day nothing went right but does not select one event and expand with details.
The student has an understanding of sentence structure, spelling, and punctuation although there are some errors.

2. What are the weaknesses?

The student simply lists bad happenings rather than concentrating on an event.
The composition lacks unity.
Some spelling and punctuation errors.

3. What are the apparent differences between the samples of writing?

To be answered later in the discussion.

4. What other information do you need about the student?

How much experience has this student had in writing, particularly the complete process?
What difficulties does the student believe he has?
How does the student feel about writing?
Does the student participate orally in class?
Has the student had an opportunity to read other students' writing and share his own?

5. What could the classroom teacher do to help the student?

Concentrate some effort on activities in prewriting--brainstorming, listing, questioning, reading.
Give classroom instructional time on examining requirements of the task and then completing the task.
Illustrate how lists can be generated and then items from the list developed into prose.
Work on language convention skills as needed.

Task 2: Pretend that you are only five inches tall.

Write a composition of about 150 words telling what your life as a five-inch person is like.

1. What are the strengths of the paper?

Student attends to the task and gives many examples of what might happen.

2. What are the weaknesses?

The student never really gets beyond listing some ideas which relate to the task.
The paper lacks supporting material to expand ideas.
Some minor problems with spelling, usage, and paragraphing.

3. What are the apparent differences between the two samples?

Essentially there are no differences. In both compositions, the student tends to list but not go beyond that.

4. What other information do you need about the student?

Same as previous answer.

5. What could the classroom teacher do to help the student?

Same as previous answer. The teacher might need to have the student take one idea and expand on it.

Summary

This student needs experience in the complete composing process and needs to understand the process. Peer conferencing would benefit this student as perhaps a self-evaluation checklist might. Student may need some experience in sharing language.

Concluding Remarks

Obviously we cannot learn all we need to know from the written product alone. We need to observe students as they work through the total composing process; however, I do believe there is much to be learned from the close examination of student papers.

Instruction based on a student's paper must capitalize on the strengths that the student has. Too often instruction focuses exclusively on weaknesses. In addition, instruction cannot encompass all deficiencies at once. Concentration on a few needs at a time will prove more beneficial to the student.

Instruction which attends to needs in spelling, usage, sentence structure, organization or any other need in writing is optimal when connected to a student's own writing: Drill and practice totally divorced from the student's writing does not make a better writer.